



Everything Michigan



Court offers deal: Pay less now or go to jail later

GENESEE COUNTY

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GENESEE COUNTY - Got outstanding bench warrants, unpaid fines and long-overdue traffic tickets?

The judges of the 67th District Court, working with other county officials, have a deal for you: Pay in July and avoid 20-percent late fees. If you pass up the deal, you could be arrested in warrant sweeps authorities vow will take place when the amnesty period ends.

Judges and county officials were to announce the "amnesty or else" program at a news conference this afternoon.

"Basically we're doing this in two steps," said Fenton District Judge Mark C. McCabe. "Between July 3 and July 26, anyone with a bench warrant for failure to pay fines and court costs can come in and pay in full and we will waive the 20-percent late fee.

"Usually, without exception, you have to pay or go to jail. Additionally, those with unpaid traffic tickets - people whose drivers licenses get suspended - can also come in and pay and get a break on the 20-percent late fees."

Those who don't take advantage of the amnesty risk being caught up in warrant sweeps being planned by the Genesee County Sheriff's Department and other law enforcement agencies.

"The second phase isn't so pleasant," McCabe said of that part of the plan.

Sheriff Robert J. Pickell said he will try to make jail space available for the proposed sweeps. He also said he would ask for cooperation from the state Department of Corrections to free up jail space.

At stake is an estimated \$7 million to \$9 million in fines that have gone uncollected for years, sometimes as long as two decades, McCabe said.

"We think that some of these people have died, have moved, and so how much is collectible is hard to say," the judge said. "But even if half of it is collectible, that's a lot of money that the courts and local municipalities are owed."

Richard E. Hammel, chairman of the Genesee County Board of Commissioners, said the problem of uncollected court and traffic fines has gone on for years.

"We know very well that some people can afford to pay, they're just dodging it," he said. "And people know that we haven't had the jail space to penalize them. Pay their fines? They've essentially said, 'Go to hell, what are you going to do to me?'"

The amnesty, however, is only a break on local late fees, the judge stressed. It cannot excuse the state's penalties and fines, for example, for those who have suspended drivers licenses.

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